

Animals in La Tène period art in England and Wales – research in practice

By Rebecca Ellis

Art in the later Iron Age of Britain, known as Early Celtic or La Tène art, has been argued to represent status, spiritual forces, and complex connections to wider Europe. Yet the role of well recognised human and animal forms has not been fully assessed. There is a lack of discussion on the identification of specific animal species, in addition to a lack of investigation as to what objects animals decorated, dating patterns, regional or stylistic markers. Was there any importance to this, or was the use of animals in art casual? Were all animals highly abstracted, or was there genuine realism before the influence of Roman Classical style?

The initial aim of my PhD project was to answer these thorny questions, in the hope of providing new discourse on the role of animal associated heritage within the discussion of wider heritage literature. However, as time progressed, it soon became clear that there were much more pertinent matters to consider. The first was what had been an underappreciation of the material available to this study, which (including humans), totalled just shy of eight-hundred objects. Secondly, it became clear that rather than focusing on wider heritage discourse regarding animal-human relations, an immediate focus was required on the role of publicly recovered tangible heritage to specialised artefact studies. In this case, that meant assessing the role of the [Portable Antiquities Scheme](#) data in England and Wales, the pit falls of the lack of inclusion of cultural value to the current definition of ‘Treasure’, and the undeniable yet highly controversial issue of knowing that not all finds are reported to the Scheme, representing a potential loss of research knowledge and information relating to local, regional and national heritage.

The methodology employed in the PhD study was purposefully uncomplicated. Though several theoretical stances on the role of art in society could have been used as an overall theme, the problem was that there was no ready dataset to apply these ideas to. Therefore, leading with a theoretical concept could have unintentionally skewed data collation, and subsequently only provided a partial picture. To avoid this scenario, this study decided to test the use of simple relational databases to investigate correlations between different aspects of data, and therefore to establish a baseline for future studies. Relational databases are a set of a minimum of two-dimensional tables, which in principle represent something akin to a single spreadsheet on Excel. Unlike a spreadsheet however, one table can be linked to another where there is a relationship between the contents. These can simulate what are termed ‘hierarchies’, which mean in artefact studies the data can represent both overarching categories of information (e.g. manufacturing technique) and specific data (e.g. lost-wax



Fig. 1 BV117 (SF-882904) East Anglian Conical Fitting from Norfolk, illustrating a regional object type using capped horn-bovine depiction, most likely representing higher status associated with economic wealth; L: 7.8cm; © Suffolk County Council Archaeology Service (CC-BY-SA)

casting). It allows for a much greater level of detailed study of a greater number of objects in a manageable and standardised format (subject to design). For this study, it allowed the assessment of animal species by patterns in manufacture, material use, geographical spread and tailored specific species investigations, such as the use of horn capping in bovines (for preliminary results on bovines see [Ellis 2020](#)).

The results of this study fundamentally challenge previous approaches to this enigmatic subject area, particularly to the balance of attention paid to genuinely figurative rather than overtly abstracted forms. Not only were there clear patterns of use of species (e.g. bovines in association with feasting), but this study found new evidence of highly regionalised approaches to animals in art previously unseen (see Ellis and Lamb 2019). The difference in the use of art by Iron Age communities challenged the notions of La Tène art being ubiquitous in meaning throughout Europe. But there have also been more practical outcomes to the project. These include the development of twenty-two new artefact typologies (e.g. leaping porcine fittings), many of which can now also be used to provide dating information to contexts of new finds.

This focus on practical application is now having some very real consequences on the interpretation of pieces which have been on display in our museums for centuries. The Marlborough bucket, discovered in 1812 outside the county town by labourers, is one of the most richly decorated vessels of Iron Age Europe, and the largest and most decorated in Britain (Fig. 2). Comprising of three decorated bands, the 100ltr vessel had been constructed of wooden staves which were held in place by iron coopering bands. Between the iron bands were three or four copper alloy, repousse decorated bands and two handle plates, which depict three horse and six human character designs. Are the differing horse designs representative of different polities, as the use of difference horses are on Iron Age coinage? Do the humans represent deities, social ideals, or are these characters in a story lost to time? New digital imaging in February 2022, and the results of this PhD, are hoping to provide some



Fig. 2 Photograph of one side of one handle plate and the top band of the Marlborough bucket, illustrating one pair of one of the six styles of human, and one pair of one of the styles of horses.

long-awaited answers.

